

Marin woman's

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Channel swim

Suzanne Heim describes feat

■ Channel record attempt fails/B5

By Ralph Chatoian

Independent Journal reporter

When Suzanne Heim of San Rafael completed her 27.5 mile swim across the English Channel, there were no marching bands waiting on the shore to greet her.

There were no throngs of fans to cheer her finish.

In fact, she recalled this week after returning to Marin, the only person to greet her was a shrimp fisherman wading

Heim: "There have been 3,500 attempts and 264 have made it. You do it for self satisfaction. You don't get fame or fortune for it ... well, maybe a bit of fame, but no fortune."

in the waters of St. Margaret's Bay, near Dover, England.

"He looked up and said in a very British way, 'I will have to enter this in my journal,'" Heim, a special education instructor, said.

"I had a little problem at the finish when I cut my feet on the rocks getting out of the water."

It was Aug. 18, and Heim, 27, had

entered the chilly water at Cap Gris Nez in France at 9:17 a.m. Ten hours and 11 minutes later she completed the crossing to become the 264th person and only the 39th American to accomplish the feat.

The wait was one of the most difficult parts of the swim, Heim said. Three times during her two-week stay she had to postpone the attempt because of rough seas. The fourth time she got the go-ahead when the water was calmer.

"Actually I found the water warmer than the San Francisco Bay," Heim said. She said the water temperature was 63 degrees in France and 59 when she ended the swim in England.

Heim's time would have been faster if she hadn't run into a work crew laying underwater cables five miles off the coast of England.

"I had to swim back, against the current, about a quarter of a mile and then go around the cable," Heim said. She said that ended any thoughts about going for the record of seven hours and 40 minutes. But she had said before her swim she would be satisfied to cross the channel in 10 to 12 hours.

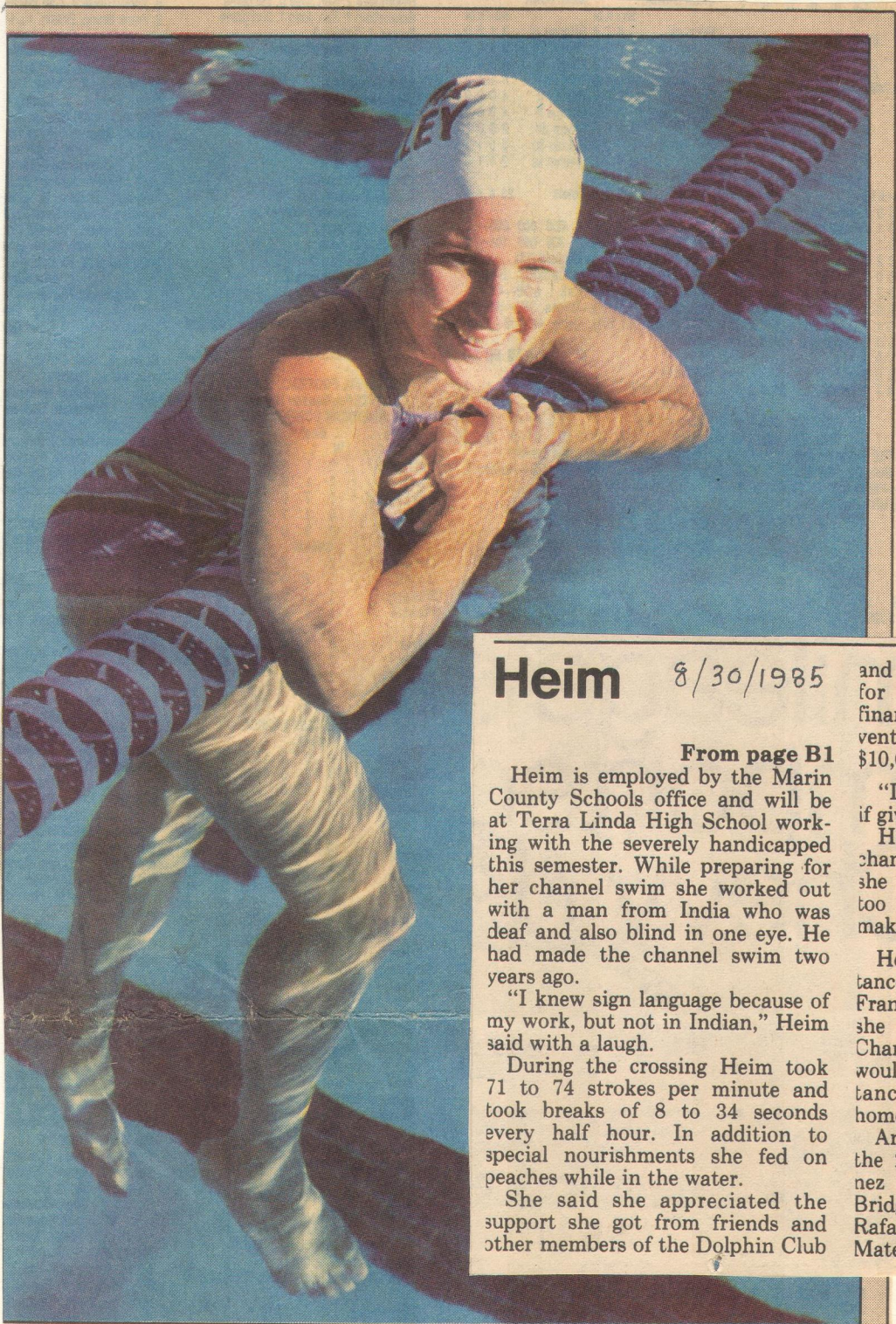
Heim's team knew where the cable work was going on and tried to avoid it but Heim's path was altered by the tides and currents.

"That's part of the venture," she said. "You never know what is going to happen. At least I wasn't stung by any jellyfish."

So far this summer six swimmers have crossed the channel and, as Heim points out, the other five were men.

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Heim is employed by the Marin County Schools office and will be at Terra Linda High School working with the severely handicapped this semester. While preparing for her channel swim she worked out with a man from India who was deaf and also blind in one eye. He had made the channel swim two years ago.

"I knew sign language because of my work, but not in Indian," Heim said with a laugh.

During the crossing Heim took 71 to 74 strokes per minute and took breaks of 8 to 34 seconds every half hour. In addition to special nourishments she fed on peaches while in the water.

She said she appreciated the support she got from friends and other members of the Dolphin Club

and TAM masters swim group, and for those sponsors who helped finance the swim. The cost for the venture was expected to be about \$10,000, she said.

"I knew deep down I could do it if given the chance."

Heim had wanted to try the channel swim for years, but until she found sponsors the cost was too prohibitive to allow her to make the trip to England.

Heim, who holds numerous distance records in swims in San Francisco Bay, said she doubted she would make another English Channel swim. But, she said, she would probably go for more distance records a little closer to home.

Among the records she holds are the 27-mile crossing from Carquinez Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge and 30 miles from San Rafael-Richmond Bridge to San Mateo Bridge.

IJ photo/Marian Little

Suzanne Heim takes break in workout at Indian Valley College pool